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DEPARTMENT FOR PA, NEA/ARN, INR/IC/CD, INR/S:STHIBEAULT AND
JMCCARTER, VOA NEWS CA, NEA/PPD:CBURGEOIS, DBENZE AND
AFERNANDEZ, IIP/G/NEA-SA RWINCHESTER
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SUBJECT: Damascus Media Reaction: Beirut Riots/Accusations
against Syria, Cartoons on Prophet Muhammad, Iraq, Iran's
Nuclear Program, Palestinian Territories (2/8)

11. Summary: Syrian papers reported that Muqtada al-Sadr, Leader
of the al-Sadr Movement in Iraq, has rejected accusations that
infiltrators enter Iraq through Syria, stressing that there is
not any evidence of this.

Al-Sadr, during a visit to the Syrian northeastern city of Raqqa
described Syrian-Iraqi relations as intertwined, saying that he
was visiting Syria to boost those relations in all fields.

"The visit aims to enhance relations between Syria and Iraq on
the popular and governmental levels. In addition, we express
support to Syria in the face of pressure the country is
encountering," Sadr added.

He underlined that the neighboring countries are cooperating
with Iraq to cement security and stability, and stressed the
importance of putting a timetable for occupation withdrawal.

Syrian papers also featured a statement by US Brigadier General
Mark Kimmitt to "The Guardian" admitting that the presence of
more than 300,000 troops in the Middle East, most of them
American, was a "contributory factor" to instability in the
region.

"Our position is, when we leave we will not have any bases
there," General Kimmitt said, without speculating when the
withdrawal might be.

End summary.

12. Selected Headlines:

"Denmark faces economic losses and complains about the 'lack of
European solidarity.' Demonstrations of Islamic anger
continue... Syrian lawyers halt trials in protest of cartoons
that insult Prophet Mohammad" (Government-owned Tishreen, 2/8)

"Minister of Awkaf Al-Ayoubi confers with the French Ambassador
to Damascus: No one has the right to insult religious symbols.
Syrian Mufti Hassoun receives Ambassadors of India and Norway

and emphasizes the importance of dialogue" (Government-owned Tishreen, 2/8)

"Muqtada al-Sadr in Raqqa: Syria strives to cement stability in Iraq; no evidence of infiltrations through Syrian borders" (Government-owned Al-Thawra, 2/8)

"Iraqi protest closure of the Basra airport by British forces. Four US marines killed in two explosions near Al-Anbar" (Government-owned Tishreen, 2/8)

"US General [Kimmit]: Foreign troops in the region are responsible for the state of instability in the region" (Government-owned Al-Thawra, 2/8)

"Four Palestinians martyred by Israeli shooting. Khaled Mashaal in Cairo: We will acknowledge Israel if it acknowledges our rights. Amer Mousa, SecGen of Arab League, calls for comprehending Israeli intentions" (Government-owned Tishreen, 2/8)

"Putin expresses worry over the situation in the region: Severing aid to the Palestinian people is a big mistake" (Government-owned Tishreen, 2/8)

13. Editorial Block Quotes:

"Their Bet, and Ours"

Isam Dari, an editorialist in government-owned Tishreen, wrote (2/8): "The riots in Beirut against the background of cartoons about the Prophet Muhammad were painful and shameful, just like the violent protests that took place in Damascus....
"We reject the use of violence and the chanting of racist slogans to express anger and protest.... Demonstrations should be staged in a civilized manner as violence sends wrong messages and makes things worse.... In this tense atmosphere, those who hold grudges against Syria find an appropriate climate to continue to perform their set role in a play that has become boring, a play conducted by Americans, far and near, through the exposed interference in domestic Lebanese affairs....

"We are not surprised that anti-Syria forces in Lebanon blamed Damascus for the riots.... A full year has passed and the same people continue to repeat the same sentences and hold daily news conferences only to harm Syria, its people and pan-Arab role. They are involved in cheap incitement, the ugly and bloody consequences of which are known to everyone."

"The band of hatred in Lebanon continues to spread venom, plant mines, build barriers between Syria and Lebanon, and join the game of American pressure on Damascus.... The Lebanese will one day discover and hold to account those who promoted lies and tried to mislead them for so long...."

"Is it Really a Freedom of Expression?"

Omar Jaftali, an editorialist in government-owned Tishreen, commented (2/8): "Does free speech mean ridiculing the faith of other nations.... There are red lines in Europe when it comes to the holocaust and anti-Semitism.... Cartoons on the Prophet Muhammad were meant as a deliberate insult to all Muslims. Such acts spread chaos and the culture of extremism and antagonism, which Arabs and Muslims renounce, and which has never been in the teaching of their religion, which is based on the principles of respect and tolerance....

"What happened was not innocent, nor was it part of the freedom of expression. This is a lesson to Arabs and Muslims. They should know how to deal with it. They should not underestimate

their power, on all levels, in the face of the ideas that distort their religion, creed, and deep-rooted history...."

"What Is after Referral of Iran's Nuclear Program?"

Dr. Turki Saqr, a columnist in government-owned Tishreen, wrote (2/8): "Why did the US insist on referring Iran's file to the Security Council? What are the possible scenarios after this referral?"

"The neoconservatives in Washington insisted on this referral after the Iranian president's statements on Israel's existence and the lies about the holocaust and his call on those who believe this lie to receive the Jews from Israel and leave Palestine to the Palestinians...."

"As for the scenarios, the Security Council might impose sanctions on Iran and the US might use military action against Iran either directly or through Israel.... But Iran is not a soft morsel as Bush's administration imagines. It is not a weak or hated regime, as Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq and Taliban regime in Afghanistan were...."

"Arabs, Muslims, and the rest of the world will not accept Washington's logic and flagrant bias toward Israel over the nuclear issue.... Iran is influential in the arenas of Iraq and Afghanistan and is capable of raising oil prices in the international market. All this proves that the Bush administration is in a major predicament now that the Iranian nuclear file has reached the Security Council."

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